

# Family Engagement: Adventure Central's Healthy Response to a Common Program Challenge

Nate Arnett, Angela Collie, and Crystal Sheppard – Adventure Central



## The Challenge

A common concern for youth service providers is effectively engaging adequate parental support. Providers cite challenges communicating parent expectations and having parents demonstrate success in fulfilling those expectations. At the same time, providers recognize involving families in children's learning is key to academic achievement and overall healthy development (Epstein 1991; Fan and Chen 2001; Gettinger and Guetschow 1998; Hara and Burke 1998; Jaynes 2005) and as such, parent engagement in youth programs is essential. However, youth programs continue to struggle with how to attain and sustain family involvement.



## The Adventure Central Response

Adventure Central, a partnership for positive youth development between Five Rivers MetroParks, Ohio State University Extension, and 4-H has developed multiple strategies to involve families in their afterschool program and has seen growing success. Specific efforts include mandatory annual parent meetings, regular family engagement programs, utilization of a Parent Progress Report, and staff participation in self-evaluation and continuous improvement plan of family engagement efforts as part of a community collaborative initiative.



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION  
4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT  
&  
FIVE RIVERS METROPARKS



"PARTNERS IN POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT"

## Current Initiatives

### Parent Progress Report

Introduced in 2011, Adventure Central has utilized a Parent Progress Report which serves as the backbone tool for family engagement and support for the program. This semi-annual report provides families with feedback in the areas of communication, youth attendance, submitting copies of youth report cards, parent volunteerism, and attendance at family programs. Families are given an overall score (1-100) and those with exemplary scores are publicly recognized for their commitment. Families with a score below 70 are required to attend a meeting with staff and may not be eligible for preferred enrollment in future programs. Extenuating circumstances are taken into consideration and families have opportunities to earn bonus points (by attending Extension sponsored programs or other educational/family-oriented programs in the community).

Overall, the Parent Progress Report has proven to be an effective method of clearly communicating program expectations with families, holding families accountable for these expectations, and increasing the positive program support available to youth, specifically noting increases in parent volunteerism and greater participation at events.

### Parent Progress Report Components

#### Communication (25 pts)

Support staff  
Information updated  
Timely responses

#### Youth Attendance (20 pts)

Proactive communication on absences  
Arrivals and departures consistent with schedule

#### Youth Report Card (15 pts)

3 report cards/progress reports submitted

#### Parent Volunteerism (20 pts)

Minimum 5 hours each semester

#### Family Engagement Programs (20 pts)

Attend at least 2 events/activities

## Parent Progress Report Results

- ↑ Increased parent volunteerism
- ↑ Increased family program attendance
- ↑ Increased parent communication
- ↓ Decreased youth behavior problems

## Summer and After School Collaborative

Recent efforts with program staff to assess family engagement utilizing a local tool built on best practices, the Family Engagement System Self-Evaluation (or FESSE) (Adams 2014), is also providing staff with other perspectives on strengths of family engagement efforts and the ability to put continuous improvement plans in place for aspects that can be enhanced.

## Family Engagement

### Events

Special emphasis has been placed on family engagement events that highlight youth work in after school monthly themes or that introduce families to activities they might not try independently. Youth and teen leadership for these events is a significant focus.



### Interactions

Staff make concerted efforts to engage parents in a variety of ways, and most importantly, not only when there is a problem. In short, if parents feel safe and comfortable at the center, everyone wins because the staff is more supported, the youth is better able to fully engage, and the parent can invest and receive support as needed.

Methods for interaction include: daily communication when youth are picked up, emails, FaceBook, message board, flyers, phone and text reminders

## Lessons Learned and Recommendations

- **Get Everyone Involved** – Family engagement is everyone's responsibility and needs to be part of the way you do business at all levels.
- **What Gets Measured, Gets Done** – Evaluating your expectations and intentions makes them more meaningful and creates a common language.
- **Kids First** – Activities need to focus on the kids and help parents/caregivers be good supports for their kids.
- **They Don't Care How Much You Know Until They Know How Much You Care** – It will take time to build trust, but if done with intention your influence will be much stronger in the long run.
- **Only Human** – Recognizing that things happen and we are all on our journey at a different place. When expectations are not met, remember to seek to understand before being understood.